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ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-121256>

Journal Article

Published Version

Originally published at:

Casula, Philipp (2015). The Syrian Conflict through Russian Eyes revisited. Russian Analytical Digest, 175:6-10.

ANALYSIS

Russia between Diplomacy and Military Intervention: The Syrian Conflict through Russian Eyes revisited

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Abstract

As the Syrian Civil War continues to rage relentlessly, the Russian position seems unchanged. While the Kremlin supports the regime in Damascus, Russian media continue to portray the conflict as a legitimate government's struggle against terrorism. This paper analyzes the coverage in Russian media outlets and discusses the Russian diplomatic efforts, which have unfolded particularly since mid-2014. It argues that, at least for the time being, the Russian military intervention complements rather than contradicts Russian diplomatic efforts. While criticized by the West over its role in Syria, Russia has at least contributed to bringing a variety of actors around one negotiating table in Vienna in late October 2015.

Since its start in March 2011, the Syrian civil war has claimed over 250,000 lives and left over one million injured. According to UN figures,¹ 7.6 million Syrians are internally displaced, and over four million have left the country, heading especially to neighboring countries but also to Europe. Syria itself, including historic cities and sites, is devastated. From the start, Russia sided with the regime, endorsing Damascus' narrative of a war against terrorism. Over the past years, the Russian interpretation of the conflict, as well as its pro-regime posture, has seemingly remained unchanged. However, in 2015 Russia has embarked on a remarkable spate of diplomatic activity, triggered or reinforced mainly by two factors: first, the spectacular rise of ISIS and the increasingly difficult situation of the regime on the ground; second, by the nuclear agreement reached between the international community and Iran. Also, the large-scale arrival of Syrian refugees in Europe, softened the latter's diplomatic position. Finally, in a dramatic move, Russia dispatched military aircraft to Syria and became an active warring party. This is post-Soviet Russia's first military intervention beyond its neighborhood. This paper will answer two questions: 1) to which extent did the perception of the conflict in Russia change? 2) What impact has Russian diplomacy had and how does it relate to the Kremlin's decision to intervene militarily?

Russia's View on Syria: the Media Front

Compared to our analysis in this publication in 2013,² the Russian media's attention to the Syrian war has progressively dwindled, only to experience a sudden surge after Russia sent its military into Syria. Between 2013 and 2015, no major reports by embedded journalists, like those by Anastasiya Popova or Yevgeny Poddubny

in 2012, have been aired on Russian mainstream channels. Coverage has widely remained focused on the military ups and downs or on missions of the Russian Emergency Ministry, which has regularly flown supplies to Syria and evacuated Russian citizens and families from Syria. A *Vesti.ru* special section on Syria perfectly reflects this trend.³ Other foreign policy topics have dominated the airwaves instead, especially the conflict in Ukraine. During the past two years, only special interest outlets have provided continuous coverage of the conflict, such as *ANNA-News*. More political assessments were provided by newspapers or by such publications such as *Azia i Afrika Segodnia*, a monthly published by the Russian Academy of Sciences since the late 1950s. The journal mirrors the general Russian skepticism regarding the Arab Spring. Nailya Fakhruddinova, for example, contends in No. 5/2013 that the revolutions in the Middle East have not yielded the expected results. She claims that "the Arabs time and again return to the Islamic ideology", because of a general lack of guiding ideas in the region. The failure of the Arab Spring, she argues, is the result of "the Arab folly and of Western state terrorism", since the Arabs under their previous leaders actually had few things to complain about, citing the Libyan health-care system under Gaddafi as an example. Such undifferentiated assessments about the "nature of Arabs" are, however, rather the exception. In a seven page-long contribution to No. 6/2015, Maria Kholdynskaia-Golenishcheva, spokeswoman of the Russian permanent representation at the UN in Geneva, describes in detail the development of the international context to the Syrian crisis. Avoiding the incendiary language of Fakhruddinova, she blames especially Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the West for supporting opposition organizations, which have only a slim social basis in Syria itself, while

1 <<http://www.unhcr.org/559d67d46.html>>.

2 Philipp Casula, "Civil War, Revolution or Counter-Insurgency? The Syrian Conflict through Russian Eyes", in *Russian Analytical Digest* 128 (2013): 4–7, <http://www.css.ethz.ch/publications/DetailansichtPubDB_EN?rec_id=2561>.

3 Tema: Konflikt v Sirii, <<http://www.vesti.ru/theme.html?tid=95994>>.

disregarding the regime's internal opponents.⁴ Finally, even the late Yevgenii Primakov, Russia's most renowned Middle East expert, directly blames U.S. policies for the rise of the so-called Islamic State. In No. 7/2015, he highlights the danger that ISIS poses to Central Asia and to Russia itself. ISIS perfectly fits both the Syrian regime's, as well as the Kremlin's, narrative that the bulk of the opposition consists of terrorist groups. All of these reports share a deep-seated distrust of the West and of the revolutions of the Arab Spring.

The recent spike in Russian diplomatic and, now, military activity has triggered more and more reports in Russian mainstream media. Russian policy-makers badly need this surge in reporting, because Russians have mostly not displayed any interest in the Syrian civil war, and widely opposed a Russian military intervention.⁵ Hence, state media has started to report again in more detail on the war⁶, and public opinion is beginning to change.⁷ For instance, the infamous Dmitry Kiselev opened one edition of his *Vesti Nedeli* (September 20) with a report on "We do not give up on Syria" (*Sirii ne sdaïom*). Kiselev argued that the U.S. "stand on one frontline with the terrorist caliphate" and "together they try to destroy Syria as a secular state". The weekly program also marked the return of above-mentioned Yevgeny Poddubny to Syria, reporting from the surroundings of Palmyra and Harasta, and of Anastasiya Popova reporting on threats to the "Christian civilization" in Syria. Both Poddubny and Kiselev resume the grand narrative of the Syrian state's fight against "terrorists" and "radicals", highlighting the presence of Russian citizens in the ranks of ISIS and underscoring that giving up Russia's "staunch ally" Syria would be equivalent with "inviting the terrorists" over to Russia. Russian TV features the conflict with often overzealous reports,⁸ stress-

ing the professionalism of the Russian servicemen and the top-notch technology of Russian weapons. Critical assessments of the Russian involvement can be found in quality newspapers, such as *Vedomosti* or *Novaia Gazeta*. In the latter, the renowned Yulia Latynina complains that Syria "is not our land, not our war, not our territory, not our rules",⁹ while in the former, Grigorii Yudin highlights the legality but the non-legitimacy of the Syrian regime. Denis Volkov shows that whenever "terrorism" enters the political scene it freezes elite competition.¹⁰ Finally, *Gazeta.ru* also provides quality analysis, highlighting that there are at least five separate conflicts going on in Syria today, which are lumped together in the formula of a "war against terrorism".¹¹

What is most appalling about the mainstream-assessments of the Syrian crisis is the sharp criticism of the West and the deep, fervent distrust of the United States. While there can be no doubt that Western policies have been erratic and inconsistent, claiming an alliance between the U.S. and ISIS seems far-fetched. However, this rhetoric bears witness that, for Russia, the Syrian conflict is more than a regional crisis. It is also a question of foreign policy principles, of Russia's status in the world, its identity as major world power, and of the relations between the West and Russia. More specifically, the Kremlin dismisses any foreign interference into other states' internal affairs, rejects regime change, while it is indifferent as to whether a regime is democratic or not. Concerning Syria, this position completely ignores legitimate demands raised by the opposition in March 2011 and the violent repression of these protests, it also disregards that the current regime has lost much if not all of its legitimacy. But if the Western tack on the crisis has been such a failure in Russian eyes, what has Russia accomplished?

The Diplomatic Front: Teaching a Lesson to the West or Failure of an Initiative?

What most Russian observers share is the conviction that Russia has a special role to play in Syria, both on historical and on contemporary grounds. They argue that Russia has special access to both the government and to its rivals. Since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, Russia has consistently supplied diplomatic cover

4 Namely the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change (NCCDC). The NCCDC, however, does not receive any critical treatment by Kholdynskaia-Golenishcheva. Especially, she avoids the thorny question to which extent this opposition is linked to the regime.

5 Voina v sirii: vnimanie, otsenki, *IGIL*, <<http://www.levada.ru/28-09-2015/voina-v-sirii-vnimanie-otsenki-igil>>.

6 Russia launches media offensive on Syria bombing, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34411653>> and Air strikes on the airwaves, <<http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/listening-post/2015/10/air-strikes-airwaves-151012151620777.html>>.

7 <<http://www.levada.ru/2015/10/19/simpatii-rossiyan-na-sto-rone-asada/>>; see also "Russian Attitudes on Russia's Intervention in Syria", in Russian Analytical Digest 173 (2015): 13–16 (Levada opinion polls conducted on 2–5 October 2015, with diagrams), <http://www.css.ethz.ch/publications/DetailsansichtPubDB_EN?rec_id=3386> and the opinion polls on pp. 11–20 of this issue.

8 Russian TV: Good weather for bombing in Syria, <<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2015/Oct-06/317816-rus>

sian-tv-good-weather-for-bombing-in-syria.ashx>.

9 Nas kinur' vse, <<http://www.novayagazeta.ru/columns/70196.html>>.

10 Asad zakonni, no nelegitimni, <<http://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2015/10/05/611387-vlast-pravo-dorogu-tiranii>>; Rossiia pomeshala zapadnoi koalicii, <<http://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2015/10/05/611517-rossiya-pomeshala-koalitsii>>.

11 Bombir' bez kontsa nevozmozhno, <http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2015/10/09_a_7812335.shtml>.

for the regime in Damascus.¹² However, since mid-2014, the Russian diplomatic efforts have gradually moved well beyond that and the Kremlin has assumed a more active diplomatic stance. Foreign minister Sergey Lavrov has repeatedly condemned the instability that the West has created in Iraq and Libya. The U.S., he added, “need to be trained that affairs can only be conducted on the basis of equality of rights, balance of interests, and mutual respect”.¹³ Russia sees in Syria the chance to set an alternative example on how to handle conflicts in the Middle East, and in doing so to restore the international prestige it has lost due to the Ukrainian crisis.

Russia’s diplomatic efforts followed a formal and a non-formal track, each pursuing another aim. On the informal diplomatic track, Russian diplomacy pursued the goal of uniting the opposition and bringing it to one table with the regime. Moscow hosted three rounds of consultative talks with various opposition groups and the regime, in January, April and August 2015. These talks were conducted by the head of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences, Vitaly Naumkin, resulting in the “Moscow platform provisions”.¹⁴ These provisions call among others for a settlement of the Syrian crisis by political means on the basis of the “Geneva communiqué” of June 2012, for the fight against terrorism, the preservation of Syrian statehood, reconciliation, and inter-Syrian national dialogue without any external interference. According to these principles, however, the issue of regime transition and democratic reforms is completely set aside. There is also no mention of the crimes perpetrated by the regime and how to handle them. This can hardly be a satisfying basis for broad sections of the opposition. Indeed, some regime opponents have boycotted some of the discussion rounds, which have been repeatedly accused of including only those parts of the opposition that are also accepted by the regime.

On the formal diplomatic track, Moscow’s second aim is to form a broad “antiterrorism coalition” against ISIS. Deputy foreign minister Mikhail Bogdanov, the Kremlin’s special envoy to the Middle East, has been instrumental to this aim. Increasingly, however, it has also been Sergey Lavrov and Vladimir Putin who have participated in these negotiations efforts. Especially since June 2015, Moscow hosted top politicians from all over the Arab world or sent its diplomats to the Mid-

dle East. On August 3, Lavrov met with his Qatari and U.S. counterparts, as well as with the former Chairman of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (National Coalition), Ahmed Moaz al-Khatib, in Doha. Lavrov held conversations with the Kuwaiti and UAE foreign ministers (August 10), and met at least twice with his Saudi counterpart, Adel al-Jubeir,¹⁵ since August 2015. Lavrov held talks with the Head of the National Coalition, Khalid Hodja, with Haytham Manna, former coordinator of Syria’s National Coordination Committee, and repeatedly with Iranian foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif (August 13, 14, and 17).

Vladimir Putin discussed the conflict with the Egyptian President (August 26), with the King of Jordan, with the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi (August 25), with the Turkish president (September 23), with the Saudi Defense Minister (October 11), with the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi (October 11), as well as with Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu (September 21), who came to Moscow with top intelligence and military representatives. Finally, Vladimir Putin astounded everybody by welcoming Bashar al-Assad to Moscow on October 20. While Russian foreign policymakers have repeatedly claimed that Moscow does not cling to Assad personally,¹⁶ this visit demonstrated that the Kremlin recognized the current Syrian president as legitimate leader and legitimate negotiating partner. Putin later briefed the kings of Saudi Arabia and Jordan, as well as the presidents of Egypt and Turkey by phone on the talks he held with Assad.

Thanks to Russian mediation, there also was an enigmatic meeting between Syrian security chief Ali Mamlouk and Saudi politicians in early August in Jeddah: they met for the first time in four years in the presence of Russian representatives. However, this meeting remained inconclusive.¹⁷ Finally, while diplomats went in and out of Moscow, there was another guest, who arrived at the end of July: the visit of Qasem Soleimani, general of the Iranian Al-Quds Force, suggesting that Moscow was gauging its military options in advance, just in case of a failure of diplomacy.

12 Since 2011, Russia (together with China) has vetoed four draft resolutions against Syria in the UN Security Council. Security Council—Veto List, <http://www.un.org/depts/dhl/resguide/scact_veto_table_en.htm>.

13 <http://archive.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/newsline/02EBC66354EF10E544257B0E0045AD41>.

14 Moscow Platform Provisions, 15.04.2015, <<http://geneva.mid.ru/>>.

15 Conflit en Syrie: Moscou et Riyad affichent leurs fortes divergences, <<http://www.lorientlejour.com/article/938664/conflit-en-syrie-moscou-et-riyad-affichent-leurs-fortes-divergences.html>>.

16 <<http://news.yahoo.com/syria-opposition-says-russia-not-clinging-assad-112738882.html>>.

17 The Saudis demanded that all foreign fighters leave Syria, including those of Hezbollah, in exchange for halting support for the opposition, cf. L’Arabie saoudite et la Syrie auraient repris contact grâce à Moscou, <<http://www.rfi.fr/moyen-orient/20150804-arabie-saoudite-syrie-rencontre-riyad-contact-russie-mamlouk-ben-salman>>; see also: <<http://www.newsru.co.il/mideast/07aug2015/saud8022.html>>.

The most remarkable meetings, however, took place in Vienna. The negotiations on October 23 gathered the Saudi, Turkish, U.S. and Russian foreign ministers. A week later, on October 30, delegations from 17 countries arrived in Austria, including Egyptian and Iranian delegations. To have Iran and Egypt at the negotiating table was an important demand of Russian diplomacy. With Saudi Arabia and Iran at one table, eventually, the two key contenders in Syria's proxy war finally can talk face-to-face. Only weeks earlier, the Saudi foreign minister had underscored that Iran was "the last country to talk to" on Syria. Finally, in the third round of talks in Vienna on November 14, spurred by the Paris terrorist attacks, negotiators agreed on an 18-month transition plan to establish a new Syrian government. This plan echoes an earlier Russian proposal for a reform process that would pave the way for presidential elections.

All in all, Russian diplomatic efforts yielded few tangible results, and mainly confirmed the divide between Moscow and Iran on the one hand, and Turkey and the Gulf States on the other: while all sides recognize the threat posed by ISIS, Russia and Iran want to postpone the issue of regime transition until ISIS is defeated or, at least, until the country is stabilized again. However, neither the Western-backed Syrian opposition, nor key regional players, can accept a deal under which Assad stays in power. While the Kremlin wants to include the regime in the fight against terrorism, the Gulf states and, to a lesser extent, the West cannot accept its involvement during a transition.¹⁸ Saudi Arabia, in particular, has rejected all of Moscow's overtures so far. Prospects of forging an anti-ISIS alliance that unites Syria's regional neighbors seemed unlikely until Russia stepped-in militarily.

Russia's Military Power Play

Russia's recent military build-up in Syria must be seen against this diplomatic backdrop. On the one hand, it complements the diplomatic effort and has contributed to a further acceleration in diplomatic activity. First, it has led to the emergence of a *de-facto* alliance against ISIS: Russia established communication on military operations at least with the U.S., with Israel, Iraq, Jordan and, most recently, with France. Second, Russia has asserted itself as key player in the conflict. Western leaders are eager to talk to the Kremlin on Syria and have even started conceding that the current regime has a role to play in any negotiations. Finally, whatever the outcome of the war, Russia will be part of the deal and have

boots on the ground in the strategic coastal provinces of Syria. On the other hand, the military activity hints at Moscow's diplomatic failure, so far. The clear drawback of having Russian soldiers in Syria is that they jeopardize Russia's position as a neutral mediator in the conflict. Despite Moscow's long support for Damascus, it also tried hard to present itself as an equidistant player that can talk on an equal footing to all sides. With Russia becoming a warring party, this position can hardly be upheld. However, Russia's influence on the regime has increased even further, and its position *vis-a-vis* Iran in Syria is strengthened. Damascus will rely even more on Russian support and will become more receptive to diplomatic pressure from Moscow.

Conclusions: A Common Enemy is Not Enough?

Russian perceptions on the Syrian civil have remained largely consistent. They portray it as a fight against terrorism and highlight the negative influence of the West in the Middle East, the latter being a perspective with a long tradition since Soviet times. Media reports show that for Russia, the conflict in Syria is not only about Syria itself, but that it is about Russia's standing in the world, about its identity as global player. Syria is also a field on which Russia's relations with the West can be shaped. The aim of Russia's diplomatic effort has been to unite the Syrian opposition, the West, and the regime in the fight against ISIS. To attain this goal, it repeated the mantra of the fight against terrorism, in an attempt to split the political space into pro-ISIS and anti-ISIS camps. "Terrorism" is an ideal catchword for establishing such a division. However, this approach disregards that the Syrian regime itself cannot be put unequivocally in one or the other group: regime and the state¹⁹, as well as regime and terrorism are not disconnected in the Syrian civil war. These tight connections are one reason why this operation, pursued both diplomatically and now militarily, has failed so far. It disregards the variety of demands coming from different camps inside and outside Syria, from Syrian society and from various military and non-military players. Finally, the approach has met stern resistance from Saudi Arabia, for now. However, it might turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy: on the one hand, facing Russian airstrikes, many opposition groups might unite under the auspices of stronger, more radical factions, and Syria's National Coalition has already said it would boycott talks proposed by the UN because of Russia's interven-

18 John Kerry, Philip Hammond, Angela Merkel and Recep Tayyip Erdogan are the latest additions to the list of formerly staunch anti-Assad politicians, who at least seem willing to talk to the Damascus regime again.

19 Khedder Khaddour, *Shielded by the State: Assad's monopoly over Syria's public institutions*, <<http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=61027>>

tion. On the other hand, assured by Russian air power, the regime, too, might become more unyielding than it was before. Vitaly Naumkin has already complained about “Assad’s intransigence on issues related to negotiations with the opposition”.²⁰ However, the military effort in Syria seems, at first sight, to complement the diplomatic effort and to forge a *de-facto* alliance against ISIS. The Paris bombings pushed France to coordinate its campaign with Russia. Still, as long as Russia not only targets ISIS, but everyone who threatens the Damascus–Homs–Hama–Aleppo corridor and the Syrian coast, this *de-facto* coalition will remain unstable. Against the backdrop of the results of the Western bombing campaign in Syria and given Russia’s own experience in Afghanistan, the Kremlin knows well that this war cannot be won by military force, especially not by air strikes, alone. It also knows well that for the foreseeable future there will be no united Syria. Syria is already partitioned. Russia is merely deepening this partition.

Finally, while Russia has contradicted its own mantra of opposing foreign military interventions, it returned onto the international stage as a country which strives to be more than a “regional power”: it seeks international influence and recognition. The intervention in

Syria has also had a powerful effect on Russia’s domestic audience, since the Kremlin had promised such a return to world power status. Other promises of the regime did not materialize, like modernization or well-being, but this one demand seems have been fulfilled, and it might boost the current Russian regime’s position. The portrayal of the events in Syria also distracts from the events in Ukraine while, at the same time, they echo the perception of the conflict there. State media stress the malicious influence of the West, revolutionary regime change, and the following descent into chaos. Russia’s stance on Ukraine and its stance on Syria reflect and reinforce each other. Additionally, the Kremlin sends a mixed message to its own Muslim population: on the one hand, Moscow recently opened one of the biggest mosques in Europe, signaling that Islam is part of Russian tradition; on the other hand, it retains the authority to determine what constitutes legitimate faith and what it considers radical faith, both at home and abroad. Vitaly Naumkin explicitly mentions that Muslims have been “brainwashed” or “duped” by terrorists. Naumkin claims that what Russia is doing in Syria “serves the interests of the whole Islamic World”.

About the Author

Philipp Casula is a Post-Doctoral Researcher at the University of Zurich.

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